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Play

CHAPTER 1

WHY PLAY?

This book invites you to *come and play*. Why? Well for one thing, it's fun! The pleasure of play is one of the big reasons we mammals have continued to play over the millennia. This self-reinforcing quality is only one of play's mystifying and delightful characteristics. We also play for the experience of play itself rather than any product the action might produce. During play there is also deep concentration. Sometimes the action appears to speed up so time passes quickly. Other times it slows down so movements appear to be in slow motion when compared to ordinary time. It is also voluntary. You can't *make* people play. Play contributes to creativity, the learning of languages and preparing for social roles. It seems to be everywhere because it can't be confined to one kind of activity. Anything that can be done—even one's work—can be done in a playful way.

Everyone knows what play is when they do it, but no one knows exactly how to put what they do into words. Perhaps the biggest reason for this is that play is signaled nonverbally. When people say, "Let's play," they may not mean it, but the signal—a twinkle in the eye, a shrug of the shoulders, a grin or some other action—*shows* what is intended and can't be faked. What follows after the "play signal" becomes *set aside* in a different framework than the everyday world and therefore has a kind of "as-if" quality to it. For example when dogs are play fighting they know not to bite all the way down and that the "fight" can be broken off at any time with both parties wagging their tails. In this sense play is considered by some to not be real. On the other hand, there is something about play that is more real than ordinary experience. It helps us work out new solutions to old problems and become re-created—which is very real.

Books about play are seldom playful. When I re-read the first edition of this book after about thirteen years I was surprised how dry it was. What I remembered was not what had been written, but the fifteen years of fun it was based on. The classes with children and the workshops with adults were full of laughter and playful give-and-take. Only a little of that got transferred to the written page. Still, this book is intended to be as light-hearted as it is serious. The way it all began still makes me laugh out loud after almost fifty years!

HOW THIS BOOK BEGAN

In 1960 I was in my middle year at Princeton Theological Seminary. Something was missing in my theological training. What was it? Slowly I began to realize that

children played no part in our theological studies. Hadn't Jesus said that we need to welcome children to know God and that we need to become like them to enter the Kingdom? My own childhood had included experiences of God's presence, which set me on the path to Princeton. How could children be left out after I got there?

This vague sense of something missing snapped sharply into focus when it was time to take the required religious education class. At last, children were mentioned! Alas, they were still a side issue. Adult education and educational theory took center stage. Children were treated like empty vessels that needed entertaining and filling up. The emphasis was on getting the doctrine right and then convincing children to believe it. No one seemed to think children might already know God and that what they needed was an appropriate language to construct their own personal meaning about that reality.

At the time I could only intuit this and could neither articulate nor advocate for it. All I could do was disrupt the class with my frustration and apparently I did that very well. Finally, I was ordered by the Dean to take a tutorial with the professor rather than continuing to ruin the class. The professor who made this creative suggestion to the Dean was D. Campbell Wyckoff. I wrote a paper for him about what I thought religious education ought to be like and that was the beginning of Godly Play, even though I had no idea then. It was still decades away from having a name.

My personal experience as I was growing up suggested that children's knowledge of God was undifferentiated and mostly nonverbal. That is what most adult mystics have said across the centuries when they tried to explain their own mature experience of God. If this is true, then what children need is not to be filled with facts or to be entertained but to learn the art of how to use the best language possible to identify their experience of God. Intuitively, play seemed to me to be the way to help children learn and practice this language and to name and express what they already know.

When children learn the language of mathematics they have already experienced *adding* and *subtracting* as they pile things up or take things away in their play. The *language* of mathematics helps them become more conscious of what they are doing and it gives them the power to be more flexible and orderly about such actions. Why wouldn't religious language work in the same way?

The problem is that religious language is so different from the language of science, which is the language most emphasized in schools today. Instead of the functions of adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing, the Christian language system has the functions of identity making (sacred story), stimulating exploration of Christian meaning (parable), making redemption available to the community (liturgical action) and

opening the way to experience the presence of the mystery of God directly (contemplative silence).

My question in 1960 was “How can one teach such a strange language?” It took a decade of working in churches and schools before a method was discovered. The Montessori method was chosen as the best way to connect the child’s intuition of God with the language of the church. Children could be encouraged to construct their own meaning about God by the playful interaction of their experience with Christian language, I thought.

Our family moved to Italy for a year, 1971-1972, so I could study Maria Montessori’s educational approach at the Center for Advanced Montessori Studies in Bergamo. As I gained experience with Montessori education in the years that followed, I also realized that Montessori was way ahead of me. She and her followers, especially Sofia Cavalletti in Rome, had already developed a kind of Montessori religious education. That made my task easier—in theory—but it still took another twenty years of experience before the first edition of *Teaching Godly Play* was published. It took another fifteen years after that for this second edition to be ready.

I work slowly, quietly and carefully, but surprises come hopping like little rabbits into view all the time. One of the biggest surprises about this book is that almost nothing fundamental has changed since the first edition. The last fifteen years have confirmed what the first twenty years discovered.

This invitation to *come and play* is based on what Jesus said about welcoming children and becoming like them. This is a way to know God and to enter God’s Kingdom. One of the most interesting things about accepting this invitation is that the memories of your own childhood will become more available to you as you work with children. This will provide a deeper foundation for Jesus’ words in your own experience as well as help you gain insight into the community of children you work with.

This invitation and its consequences is why I would like to tell some stories about how the bridge was built during my childhood between the personal and undifferentiated experience of God’s presence and the language of the church.

GOD AND THE “CHURCH GOD”

I grew up in a small town on the prairie of Southwestern Kansas. I could see the Presbyterian Church from my bedroom window. It was just a block away, across the street from my grandmother’s house. Of course, many memories of childhood get reinterpreted as the years go by, but there are also some events that are so significant

that they *require* continuing interpretation. I would like to tell you about four such moments in my life from about age 5 through age 10.

When I was about five years old I was staying with my grandmother. My grandfather was away so when it came time to go to sleep I climbed up onto his bed and snuggled in. My grandmother was in her bed only a few feet away. She turned out the light. I could hear the clock ticking. Suddenly the dark crowded in on me and I cried out, “I don’t want to die!” I don’t remember what my grandmother said, but I do remember her presence in the dark as she helped me get in touch with a larger presence, a Power without a name that I could *feel*. The safety of this overarching Power helped me relax. I stretched, yawned and went to sleep.

My earliest memory of church was about the same time. I know I was not very big because going up and down the stairs to the basement education rooms in our church was very difficult. I really had to stretch my legs up and down and hang on to someone’s hand to manage the steps. They made a hollow, booming sound, which troubled me at first, as I clomped up and down.

In the basement there was an enormous room. Grown-ups talked and children tried to be quiet, sitting on little wooden chairs in a row. High on the wall to my left was a blue, shiny ribbon with baby cradles pinned to it. When we went to a smaller room there was a low table. We sat on one side and a grown-up sat on the other side. I don’t remember how we got there or found our way back to the big room, but there were only a few children in the smaller room. I remember touching the table and watching the grown-up on the other side. She talked. I don’t remember what she said, but I must have been listening because one Sunday I proudly announced to my parents, “He eats carrots for me.” The laughter associated the memory with a mild sense of shame. I had said something wrong, but I still thought I was right.

My parents explained that I should have said, “He careth for me.” That was the “memory verse” for the day. The meaning I had constructed about carrots, however, fit much better with the rest of what the teacher had said about Jesus. This is because one of the hardest things I had to do at meals was to eat carrots, which I hated. If Jesus would eat carrots for me I was grateful, but I had no way to explain or defend my theology of redemption at that time. Still, I was proud of the meaning I had created. It was mine and it made sense to me. After this, however, I began to lose interest in what was said in church, but I still enjoyed going there with my family. There was something special about getting dressed up, the singing, the beautiful windows, the wooden arches and all the people—including my grandparents and cousins.

One Easter, when I was about six, I remember standing in the family garden behind my grandmother’s house out by the barn after church. My parents, grandmother,

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aunts, uncles, cousins, and perhaps others were all gathered there happily talking and looking at the little rows of green sprouts coming up through the warming Kansas soil. I can still smell the earth, sense the stirring of the warm spring winds, and feel the new growth in the air. An intuition nudged me, barely able to be worked out in words. So *this* is what all the “Easter” fuss is about! A fragile connection began to form between the God of Power I cried out to in the dark and the social experience of going to church. I never mentioned what I had discovered about Easter, however. It was too complicated and I wasn’t sure anyone would be interested. I also didn’t want to look ridiculous again.

When I was about ten years old something happened that completed the tentative bridge between the God of Power and the Church God. Two friends and I had been very disruptive in the choir during church. The choirmaster brought us all back into the choir loft after church and sat us down. He stood right in front of me and my two friends and said something like, “You boys don’t have any right to destroy church for me or anyone else. I come here to find God in the scriptures and in the singing. (It was only years later that I realized he had not mentioned the preaching!) Your chatter and disrespect destroyed my worship this morning. You owe me an apology.”

I may not have remembered the words exactly, but what I am sure about was that there were the traces of tears on his cheeks. I had never realized until then that what went on in church actually mattered that much. I thought it was only something that one *did*. I liked being there and having my Dad unwrap a mint and slip it to me without anyone seeing, but church was basically a kind of performance one dressed up for. The connection between the God of Power and the Church God now was more conscious, but it was still perplexing. The larger questions it raised probably played a large part in bringing me to Princeton to study theology and then to work out the theory and practice of Godly Play.

In 1977, some 30 years after the confrontation in the choir loft, I read Edward Robinson’s *Original Vision*.¹ It was based on a large study of children’s experiences of God, as described by adults looking back on their childhoods. One of the chapters in his book was called “Church God.” That gave me the language to better understand the gap between the God of Power and the Church God that I had experienced. Robinson and I began to correspond. One of the things we talked about was the double meaning he claimed for the word “self-authenticating.”

One meaning for “self-authenticating” refers to an experience that presents itself in a significant way that “brings with it an assurance of its own reality.” The other meaning for “self-authentication” was, as he wrote, “the selfhood of the person to whom the experience comes.” Both the presenting and confirming aspects of a significant

experience are mysterious, elusive and important. But, what Robinson was adamant about was that religion “may support this emergent self-awareness: it cannot dictate to it. No Church God can ultimately be acknowledged unless ... acceptable to this inner authority.”² Somehow the God of Power and the social Church God both needed self-authentication to be integrated. Play, it seemed to me, was the key to helping this get done.

THE CHURCH GOD AND PLAY

Every Godly Play class seems contained in its own environment, but that is not true. The children bring their experience of the world through the door when they enter and the spirit of play expands much farther beyond the class than might be suspected. Christians value work and responsibility, so the theme of play in theology has not been a major one. There has been, however, a strong undercurrent of respect for play and this should not be too surprising because play is so fundamental to what it means to be human. To acknowledge the strength of this undercurrent we need to spend a few moments describing it.

Play was formally identified as a fundamental human quality by the distinguished Dutch historian, Johan Huizinga. He called our species *Homo Ludens* (*playing creatures*) to contrast with the views much debated at the time, that we are fundamentally *Homo Sapiens* (*thinking creatures*) or, perhaps, *Homo Faber* (*tool makers*). His book, *Homo Ludens*, originally published in Dutch in 1938, not only argued that play is a basic activity for human beings, but that culture *is* play. In the 1955 English translation he wrote, “it was not my object to define the place of play among all the other manifestations of culture, but rather to ascertain how far culture itself bears the character of play.”³ If play is fundamental to our nature and culture, as Huizinga thought, then it is no surprise that the community of children in Godly Play, which prefigures by analogy the community of the church, needs to be a *playing* culture to be authentic.

The idea of God being at play in the community of children should also be no surprise. The idea that God is at play flowed into Christianity from both Jewish and Greek sources and is associated with the creativity of God and God’s creatures. The Torah begins with the idea that we are created in the image of the Creator and that this is good (Genesis 1: 26). When Wisdom, herself, is interpreted as being a child playing delightfully before God (Proverbs 8: 30) then our creative nature and our playful wisdom are bound together. When the prophet Zechariah (8: 5) tells us that when God dwells in Jerusalem old men and women shall again sit in the streets taking their ease and that the “city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets” then we know that play is part of the ideal community.

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It may be that play is even more central to Judaism than these few scriptural references suggest. What if the Sabbath were thought of as play? That would place play in the midst of Jewish life. The Sabbath is a time set apart that gives rest and re-creates those who truly follow its traditions. Genesis suggests that Sabbath is built into God's creation. It is not just about prohibiting work but is a dynamic and redemptive time that combines prayer and study with the preparation and enjoyment of meals to celebrate God's creative gift of life.

The theme of play also flows into Christianity from ancient Greek thought. The notion of play from the Homeric epic and the Hellenic writer Hesiod is linked to physical force, like that found in competitions and contests (*agon* and *athlon*). Later interpretations emphasize the harmless play of children (the early meaning of *paidia*). In the writings of Plato (427-347 BCE) that immortalized Socrates, his teacher, play becomes an abstract philosophical term with references to a nonviolent cultural play with rules.

Mihai I. Spariosu suggested in his *Dionysus Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse* that the violent “prerational play” before Socrates (470-399 BCE) and the “rational play” that came after him are traditions that *continue* to run all through the Western Tradition and are themes still interacting today—even in the way our modern sciences are conceptualized and debated.⁴

A pre-Socratic example from the Greeks is the often-quoted Fragment 52 from Heraclitus, which the historian Hugo Rahner translated as “the Aeon is a child at play, playing draughts. The kingly rule is as a child's.”⁵ A later example may be found in Plato's *Laws*, which refers to us as playthings in the hands of God and asserts that this is our best quality.⁶ Aristotle (384-322 BCE) also commented on play in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (350, B.C.E.). Rahner summarized Aristotle's view of play as the middle ground between the buffoon, who is never serious (*bomolochos*), and the boor who is always serious (*agroikos*).⁷ This balance results in a grave-merry or “well-turning” (*eutrapelos*) person.

The Greek tradition of theological play continued after Christ's birth with the philosopher Plotinus (205-270 CE), whose Neo-Platonism greatly influenced Christianity. Plotinus wrote that all play “is secretly directed” towards contemplation and that it “arises from the longing for the vision of the divine.”⁸

The themes of play that flowed into Christianity from the Jews and the Greeks were given a new synthesis by Clement of Alexandria, who died about 215. He spoke of life as a “divine children's game” and referred to Isaac and Rebecca's love play (Genesis 26: 8) as being like the playing of the church where Christ is the husband and our human nature is the wife.⁹

This synthesis culminated in the thirteenth century, according to Rahner, with Aquinas, who advocated for the merry Christian as someone who is both serious and serene.¹⁰ The well-turning person (*eutrapelos*) of Aristotle had become Aquinas' Latin virtue of *bene vertentes*. In his commentary on Ecclesiasticus (32: 15-16 [11-12]) he wrote, "Consider here how aptly the contemplation of wisdom is compared to play. There are two reasons for this, both of them found in the very essence of play: first, play gives pleasure, and in the contemplation of wisdom there is the most profound pleasure ...; secondly, the activity of play is not directed towards some other end, but is sought for its own sake; and this also holds true in regard to the pleasures arising from the contemplation of wisdom."¹¹ Aquinas then quoted Proverbs 8:30 with approval about Lady Wisdom being the daily delight and playmate of God.¹²

Aquinas also asked specifically in his *Summa Theologica*: "Can there be a virtue in play?" After reviewing many authorities such as Augustine, who was rather positive, and the negative views of those such as Ambrose and Chrysostom, Aquinas concluded that play is virtuous.¹³ Rahner undertook his study about ancient views of play because he was concerned that it was being lost in the modern church. When the church forgets play the mystery is drained out and "we become like termites toiling in the dust."¹⁴

Interest in play by major theologians and philosophers went underground among the theologians after Aquinas in the thirteenth century. In the eighteenth century it appeared again among the philosophers when Kant took thinking "as-if" seriously and Schiller acknowledged play as the "noblest" activity of "Reason."¹⁵ In the next century the philosopher Hegel's reference to play as "the noblest and the only true seriousness" has delighted play advocates ever since.¹⁶

In the nineteenth century Nietzsche advocated for the earlier and more irrational and violent view of play.¹⁷ In the twentieth century there were connections made between play and worship such as that of Romano Guardini (1885-1968), who called worship a kind of play¹⁸, and Bernard Lang, whose history of Christian worship was called *Sacred Games*.¹⁹

Play entered the English-speaking theological conversation about 1965 when two of Hugo Rahner's German articles were collected and translated together to create the little book called *Man at Play*.²⁰ Interest peaked about 1970 and declined almost at once. David Miller's *Gods and Games: Towards a Theology of Play* provided a detailed literature review and introduction to the subject²¹, but by about 1972 interest was evaporating.

The end was signaled by Moltmann's book *Theology of Play*.²² It supposedly put Jürgen Moltmann in dialogue with leaders in the play theology movement in the

United States—Sam Keen, David L. Miller and Robert E. Neale. When Moltmann looked back on this supposed dialogue, he wrote, “We are perhaps not even talking about the same thing.”²³ He also noted: “The Puritan of work easily changes into the Puritan of play and remains a Puritan.”²⁴ Perhaps, his most trenchant remark was that “If on earth everything turns into play, nothing will be play.”²⁵

The discussion about play outside of theology, however, did not decline. In 1997, one of the classics about play—though little read by theologians—was published by Brian Sutton-Smith, who had spent a lifetime studying play. He argued in *The Ambiguity of Play* that play is ambiguous, because it is looked at from seven major points of view, each involving a different technical language or “rhetoric.”²⁶

In his summing up, however, he moved a step beyond ambiguity to say: “Clearly the primary motive of players is the stylized performance of existential themes that mimic or mock the uncertainties and risks of survival and, in so doing, engage the propensities of mind, body, and cells in exciting forms of arousal.”²⁷ Sutton-Smith did not mention the relationship of the Christian language system to play but he could have. The teasing and playful aspect of parables, the deep play of liturgy, the identity deepened by sacred stories and the wonder of contemplative silence are all a kind of “stylized performance of existential themes.”

What are the ways that one can be at play with God? With a touch of whimsy the Holy Trinity can be thought of as a “playgroup” that invites us to play in three ways. First, we are invited to play with God by participating in the play of God’s creation. Second, we are invited to play with God’s Son by participating in the gospels and in the worship and life of the church. Such play can result in redemption. Third, we are invited to play with God within, where we meet the Holy Spirit, to create, with God’s grace, a meaningful life that adds beauty to God’s creation. Godly Play encourages play with God in all three ways, all the time. In fact, it is centered around the experience of God as the Holy Trinity.

With these comments in mind about play in the history of Christian thought and practice, we now need to step back into the classroom. What is the goal of Godly Play and how can both new and experienced mentors move toward that goal?

THE GOAL AND OBJECTIVES OF GODLY PLAY FOR MATURING MENTORS

The goal of Godly Play is for children to move through the spiral curriculum during early, middle and late childhood in such a way that they will enter adolescence with an inner working model of the classical Christian language system to root them deeply in the Tradition and at the same time allow them to be open to the future.

The curriculum is thought of as a spiral because it moves upward and outward through early, middle, and late childhood. (See Chapter 7 in this book for a full description of the spiral.) What is accomplished is a kind of playful orthodoxy. To accomplish this goal there are six objectives that are important for the Godly Play mentor to keep in mind. These objectives were first described in the 1991 book *Godly Play* (Berryman, 1991, 61-109) in a slightly different way. They are revisited here with a new emphasis on the maturing mentor who:

- *models* how to wonder, which helps open the children's creative process to engage the whole Christian language system in their play with God and the community of children during early, middle and late childhood.
- *shows* children how to create meaning with wondering questions arising from the Christian language system. The parables are especially useful to stimulate the creative process, but the sacred stories and the liturgical action lessons are also needed to provide a place of safety to explore from and return to. Contemplative silence celebrates the wholeness of the relationship with God, which is more than language can articulate.
- *invites* children to choose their own work from among constructive alternatives. This gives them space to confront their existential limits and ethical issues. The experienced mentor develops over time the wisdom to draw children into the part of the Christian language system that is most significant for their current needs, and to encourage and support children in the use of the whole creative process.
- *organizes* the mentoring time around the deep structure of Christian worship. This structure has been developed over two thousand years as the best way to be with God in community. It involves gathering together, listening to the scriptures, responding to the lesson, sharing a feast, and saying goodbye with mutual blessing. This deep structure guides the Godly Play class and the outline of this book.
- *supports* the community of children by respecting and challenging them to participate constructively. When any part of the community is changed the whole system of relationships changes because all are joined by their common humanity. As John Donne wrote in Meditation XVII, "never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."²⁸ As it tolls for each, it tolls for all.
- *clarifies* the whole Christian language system by the organization of the teaching materials in the room. This clarity enables children to more easily internalize the four functions of the language system emphasized by Godly Play: sacred stories, parables, liturgical action, and contemplative silence.

Anyone who is familiar with Montessori education may think these objectives for mentors sound somewhat familiar. They should. The Montessori roots of Godly Play run deep. We turn now to a description of that involvement.

THE MONTESSORI ROOTS OF GODLY PLAY

Godly Play grew out of Montessori education, so it is ironic that most Montessori teachers and religious educators are unaware or unimpressed by Maria Montessori's many contributions to the Christian education of children. It is important, as this book begins, to acknowledge these roots. A longer and more detailed history about this connection may be found in Volume 1 of *The Complete Guide To Godly Play* (Berryman, 2002, p. 86–107).

In 1896 Maria Montessori was the first woman to graduate from the University of Rome with a medical degree. At the turn of the twentieth century she was much more famous for this and her advocacy for the advancement of women than for being an educator. Her first school was set up Rome in 1907 and in 1910 she relinquished her medical practice in Rome to dedicate herself to *the education of the whole child*. By 1912 she was world famous as an educator and made her first speaking tour of the United States. The English version of *The Montessori Method*, which is still in print, was also published that year. By 1916 she had settled in Barcelona, where she remained for the next twenty years experimenting, training teachers, and writing. She left Barcelona on an English warship during the Spanish Civil War.

Montessori shocked her contemporaries by turning education upside down. She thought that if we meet the needs of children instead of always asking them to adjust to adult needs in the educational environment a “new child” would appear. This new child, who had really been there all along, made people curious, so they came from all over the world to visit her first school. When the class was not in session, the children from the surrounding tenements would gather in their school on their own initiative and show the visitors how Montessori education worked.

Montessori's views are often reduced to the child-sized furniture and the sensorial learning materials in her classrooms, which are commonplace in educational settings today. Her greatest contribution, however, was her probing of human nature. She discovered that when children are secure in an appropriate environment they reveal a love of learning, the ability for self-direction and a deeply spiritual nature.

During her ten years in Barcelona, Montessori deepened and expanded her curriculum. This is why her most advanced books about teaching Montessori mathematics and geometry were first published in Spanish and not Italian. She also developed and expanded her approach to Christian education there.

Montessori's demonstration school had shaded walks, a meadow, pools for fish, cages for pets, and lots of light and space in the buildings. She hired artists to make the school chapel the most beautiful space on the campus. A specially selected Roman

Catholic priest showed the children how to worship in this child-centered space and Montessori created sensorial materials about the liturgy and history of the church to guide and deepen their experience of God. For example, when children prepared for their first communion they harvested the wheat and processed through the school, carrying it tied in small bundles with ribbons. They then ground the flour and stamped the rolled-out dough they had made with a personally chosen Christian symbol. Finally they baked their personal communion hosts to be consumed on the grand day when they first participated in the Holy Mysteries.

During the Second World War Montessori was in India, where she had been training teachers. She and her son, Mario, were Italians, so they were technically “the enemy.” The English authorities had the good sense to know that she was really a citizen of the world and allowed her and her son to travel and continue training Montessori teachers all over India during the War. By this time she was in her 70s. On Sundays, a friend of hers, who was there, told me that Montessori would gather a few associates to quietly continue developing the Christian part of her spiral curriculum with an awareness of the world’s many other religions all around them. When she died in The Netherlands she was buried there, since she had asked to be buried where she fell, a servant of children everywhere.

Godly Play comes from this rich tradition. I am a fourth generation interpreter of Montessori religious education and am grateful, especially to E. M. Standing of the second generation and to Sofia Cavalletti, the leader of the third generation, for their contributions to Montessori’s founding initiative that made Godly Play possible. There is one final question you may want to ask before accepting this invitation to come and play. How should you begin?

HOW SHOULD YOU BEGIN?

If you accept this invitation to come and play you will be immediately faced with the question about beginning and sustaining a Godly Play program. The transition from another program to Godly Play is probably best done slowly over about a year. Focus first on the community of children. Shift first to how Godly Play supports the community of children as you continue with the other curriculum. Then, over several months, complete the transition by shifting to the rest of the method and then to the whole curriculum after you have set up the room.

The gradual transition to the Godly Play curriculum is possible because most approaches to religious education involve story telling. Begin to tell the stories of the old curriculum in a circle like Godly Play and then slowly over time begin to use the Godly Play lessons and teaching materials. The Godly Play liturgical materials can also be introduced gradually and adapted to the practice of your parish and denomination.

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Your primary resource for the Godly Play curriculum is *The Complete Guide To Godly Play*, which is available in eight volumes, in English and Spanish (vol. 1-4) from Morehouse Education Resources (www.morehouseeducation.org). *The Complete Guide to Godly Play* is also available in several other languages in addition to English and Spanish. As the teaching materials accumulate in your classroom space, the room will, step-by-step, begin to mirror the structure of the classical Christian language system. Diagrams for suggested room arrangements are available in many Godly Play publications and on the Website of the Godly Play Foundation (www.godlyplay.org).

What happens behind the scenes is also very important. During the transition year the parents involved need to become familiar with Godly Play. This can be done by workshops and when possible by inviting parents to take part in a model class without children so the steps can be discussed. The teachers' meetings are also critical. Teachers should meet at least monthly to discuss books and articles about the theory and practice of Godly Play. The teachers need Godly Play training, but this training only marks the beginning of the journey to mastery. Godly Play Trainers might also be invited to your church to train everyone at once and to consult on how to set up a truly beautiful Godly Play environment and program.

Having given you this good advice, I must admit that at Christ Church Cathedral in downtown Houston, where I was Canon Educator from 1984-1994, we built eight beautiful classrooms the first summer I became part of the staff and we opened with Godly Play in September. (I had become an Episcopal priest in 1984 after a little more than twenty years as a Presbyterian minister.) During the following decade the tradition of monthly teacher meetings continued and was critical to the success of the program. This abrupt change was a tremendous shock to the existing system of relationships since the way things had "always been done" was dramatically disturbed, but the Dean of the Cathedral, the Vestry and I stood firmly together during the transition period so it was accomplished without debilitating stress.

Every situation, however, is different, so no cookie cutter transition plan is possible. Sometimes Godly Play doesn't take root at first. Plant it again. Care for it and one day it will flourish. Godly Play, after all, is for the long term. It is not an educational fad to be introduced for "a change" and then put in a church closet after a year or two. It is too expensive, takes too much time for volunteers to master and it usually takes from 3-6 years to become established. This is a lot of work, but do you really want to ask children to meet with unprepared and disinterested teachers about something that is so important? One of the reasons the church is in disarray today is because the adults are not deeply rooted and yet open and creative about how they think about being Christian. Godly Play can help with this and one day, if all goes well, you will have the honor of teaching the *children of children* you once taught, as Thea and I have.

That experience is not only affirming for the mature mentor but is deeply important for the church.

Godly Play is not like “painting by the numbers,” even if the first year it may feel like it. You can fill in all the numbered blanks correctly with the right color to make a coherent picture, but it will still feel artificial until you are a seasoned mentor. The second year you will be more free from the mechanics and able to enjoy the community of children and the parents more. The third year you will realize that you didn’t really understand what you were doing the first two years, even when you thought you did. After three turns around the circle of the church year with the children the whole spiral curriculum will begin to make more sense. Your increased fluency in the lessons and skill in supporting the community of children will combine in the sublime understanding of what Jesus said about welcoming children to know God and becoming like them as they enter the Kingdom.

Godly Play begins with very simple things, like teaching children how to get out their work and put it away in the right place and to clean up their own spills. All of these details will be outlined in the succeeding chapters. As these pages become a reality you will one day find the children you love entering adolescence with an inner working model of the classical Christian language system in place to guide them, not only through that turbulent time but for the rest of their lives. You will have helped create something beautiful for God.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has invited you to come and play with God and the children. When Godly Play is played well it helps integrate the personal God of Power with the social Church God, integrating both without distorting or repressing either.

As this book unfolds, you will move over the threshold with the children into the Godly Play space and time and then engage them in the circle with the lesson for the day. You will learn how to guide the response time which follows, and how to present the feast. The way to help the children say goodbye will then be described to bring a joyful closure to the experience with mutual blessing for both the mentors and children. Some thoughts about the essential elements of Godly Play will be also be presented. Finally, how to keep Godly Play open and creative by staying close to children will be discussed.

Are you ready? It is time to step through the threshold and play our way with God and the children into the Christian language game to see if we can help the whole church begin to more fully play the redemptive role in the world it has been called to.